Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training Foreign Affairs Oral History Project

LUKE KAY

Interviewed by: Charles Stuart Kennedy

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Q: June 8, 2004. This is an interview with Luke Kay on behalf of ADST, the Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training. I am Charles Stuart Kennedy. Well, let's begin. Can you tell me when and where you were born? Then we'll talk a little bit about your family.

KAY: Certainly. I was born on January 15, 1969 in Greece.

Q: A-ha! And tell me about your family. Where does the family come from?

KAY: Well, my family is from Greece, and when I was a baby we immigrated to the US, settling in Detroit, Michigan.

Q: Well, I mean, where did your family come from in Greece?

KAY: My parents were born in Northern Greece. But my grandparents came from Smyrna, a city now part of Turkey; at the time it was Greek called I Smirni.

Q: Smyrna.

KAY: Yes!

Q: You were a part of that exodus of 1923.

KAY: M grandparents were a part of the forced mass emigration of Greeks from Asia Minor.

Q: Where did your family settle in Northern Greece?

KAY: Ah, they settled in a town called Kavala.

Q: Which is a major city in northern Greece. What was your father doing in Greece?

KAY: He was a psychiatrist, a medical doctor.

Q: And your mother?

KAY: She went to the University and studied but did not work there afterwards.

Q: And what got them to go to the United States?

KAY: Well, before my father got married, he was already in the States. He did his residency in a hospital in Queens, New York. So, he went back to Greece and met my mother, and they got married. After I was born, he went back to the States to take the E. C. F. M. G., a state-by-state medical board. And at the time he passed in three states: Michigan, Pennsylvania, and New York. He had a friend in Detroit and followed his friend, so we settled in Detroit.

Q: Do you know where you got your visas in 1971?

KAY: Yes.

Q: Actually, my office probably gave you your visa.

KAY: Oh, really!

Q: I was Consul General in Athens in 1970-74.

KAY: My goodness, wow, you did! This story has come back to re-visit us 180 degrees.

Q: Well, so did you grow up in Detroit, Michigan?

KAY: I did, in the suburbs of Detroit, yes.

Q: What was your father? Was your father a psychiatrist?

KAY: He was.

Q: Do you know where he was?

KAY: I sure do. He worked at two hospitals: Northville Psychiatric Hospital in Northville, Michigan and also at the Henry Ford Hospital in Allen Park, Michigan, another suburb of Detroit.

Q: How long did you live in Northville?

KAY: All my life.

Q: What was Northville like?

KAY: It was a small town, a suburb. At the time you could say it was an "exurb" at the edge of civilization as we know it. Now, suburbia has come, overrun it, and passed on beyond.

Q: This was part of Greater Detroit.

KAY: Oh, yes, it sure is. Same county, Wayne County.

Q: Where did you go to school?

KAY: Northville High School in the same school district, K-12.

Q: Let's talk about elementary grades. What did you like?

KAY: As a little kid or older?

Q: As a little kid.

KAY: I think just about everything back then, probably social studies, history.

Q: Did you speak Greek at home?

KAY: Yes. We still do.

Q: That's fortunate you do. So many children of immigrant parents don't speak the language of their homeland, and it's too bad because they learn so easily at an early age, particularly a language such a Greek at a later age. Your family, were they part of the Orthodox Greek Church?

KAY: Yes, they were. We were involved in the church.

Q: Was there much of a Greek community there?

KAY: There is. There are at least 50,000 Greeks in Greater Detroit.

Q: Did you go through Greek class?

KAY: Yes, to my chagrin, because I hated it.

Q: So many of these courses are almost designed to make you hate them.

KAY: Yes.

Q: But you learned something.

KAY: Yes, absolutely, yes.

Q: What about outside of school, was there an active life for young kids running around the place, parks or sports, or other activities?

KAY: There were. I played soccer as a little kid; later in high school I would do swimming. But my parents pretty much had me under tight rein. I had to stay home and study most of the time.

Q: Now what happened? When you came home they would sit you down and?

KAY: Oh, yes. We had Greek school on Saturday and I'd have to study, as you know, Monday through Friday. Actually, Monday through Sunday, seven days a week.

Q: It was very, very much a part of the pattern in Greece, which means you get a very good education. Did you have brothers and sisters?

KAY: No, only child.

Q: Your father's psychiatry, did it play on you or would he sit there and analyze you?

KAY: Well, I don't know, he would know better than I. Perhaps unconsciously.

Q: Were you aware of the world of psychiatry or were you?

KAY: I mean a little bit because he would go to work and then come home. Every year we would go to the annual American Psychiatric Association (APA) convention all over the country. We would go to those even though I was a little kid. I know a little bit at least, peripherally.

Q: I noticed your name: Kay. Obviously, that's not Greek. It must be something, a longer one. What is the name?

KAY: My father had it changed, from my grandfather, but yes, it used to be much longer.

Q: Oh, I'm sure. It probably ended in "?opolis"? In high school, what sort of courses were you taking?

KAY: Again, I excelled in foreign languages: Spanish, French, German, Italian. But also, of course, AP English, AP math?

Q: "AP" means Advanced Placement?

KAY: Correct.

Q: And about reading, are you much of a reader?

KAY: Yes, I certainly was. We had a humanities class, and I loved reading.

Q: Can you think of any books which particularly struck you at the time?

KAY: Yes. I loved Wuthering Heights by Emily Bronte, and Madame Bovary by Gustave Flaubert. Also the classics, you know, not the full version but excerpts from the classics like the Iliad and Odyssey, works by Sophocles, Plato, Virgil?

Q: How about school activities?

KAY: I was into?.just to go back one part of favorite American writers, The Great Gatsby, Catcher in the Rye, Of Mice and Men, ...

Q: Oh, well, just to give an idea.

KAY: Sure, sure. And you asked about school activities. Swimming, I was on the high school varsity swim team earning "Most Valuable Swimmer" in my senior year; I also joined summer swim leagues.

Q: Swimming was big there. How about Detroit? The center of Detroit had had real problems five-ten years before your time. Many racial problems and all. The center seemed to be getting into real trouble. Did that reflect at all?

KAY: A little bit. We didn't go into downtown Detroit very often. If anything, we would go only to Greektown and ethnic festivals in the summertime; every weekend a different ethnic group. Of course, we'd go to the Greek festival every year!

Q: How did you find the Greek Orthodox Church? Were they keeping a tight rein on the kids? Did they tell you what to do, what not to do?

KAY: Well, not so much a tight rein, but they would have organized activities. It would be called GOYA (Greek Orthodox Youth of America), and we would have group trips Chicago, Toronto, New York to visit, for example, St. Basil's Academy in Garrison, New York, across the river from West Point. Or a group trip to visit the icon of the weeping Virgin Mary in Chicago; plus we'd organize group trips to the movies together or go out.

Q: When you were getting toward the end of high school, where (which university) were you looking toward going?

KAY: My father said you can go to Michigan or Michigan or Michigan. The choice is yours. So I ended up going to The University of Michigan.

Q: Which is located where?

KAY: Ann Arbor, Michigan, the main campus.

Q: It's a huge university.

KAY: It's a huge university. In fact, I think it has the largest collegiate stadium in the world, and I think it's the second largest in the country in terms of students. 44,000 to 46,000 students.

Q: How did you find it?

KAY: I loved it. It's a great college town, a great university. You get a great education.

Q: You got all the things you need, but sometimes it's hard to get in a major university like that to find your way. Did you have trouble with that or did you find you fit it in?

KAY: Initially, I was accepted to very small elite, for lack of a better word, program called INTEFLEX (integrated flexible). It was a combined pre-med/med program. So basically, from the young age of 18, I entered Medical School to do basic combined undergrad and medical school together, with a secure place in The University of Michigan Medical School.

Q: How does that work? Were you pointed towards medicine?

KAY: Yes, by my parents, my father. I was in, but I realized it wasn't for me, so I got out. Getting out was easier than getting in.

Q: What did you begin to concentrate on?

KAY: I began to concentrate on four languages. I enjoyed it very much. In fact, I got my double majors in honors Spanish and French. I studied also Classical Greek, Russian, Italian and German in addition to Spanish and French.

Q: When you were taking language, was this more than just the language?

KAY: Yes, it was literature, of course. You know, speaking, writing, and I did a semester abroad in Spain. Also a summer abroad, actually, also in Spain.

Q: Where in Spain?

KAY: The semester abroad was in Seville, Spain, in the south. The summer abroad was a shorter program in Burgos, Northern Spain. So I spent 6 months in Seville, southern Spain.

Q: As you did this in college, did the outside intrude much? You were there from when to when?

KAY: I was at The University of Michigan from 1987 to 1991.

Q: What about Foreign Affairs and that sort of thing?

KAY: I remember my first contact with Foreign Affairs was when a recruiter came to campus, and I went and heard him speak. There must have been, say, a thousand students. I asked him a question, and he asked me, "Are you Cuban?" I said "No, I'm American!" The whole crowd laughed with me.

Q: Was there any aspect, sort of a foreign policy that engaged you at the time?

KAY: Yes. I would say first of all it was an election year 1998, and presidential candidate Michael Dukakis came and spoke, and I got my picture in Business Week International with him when I met him. But yes, because obviously on campus there were Greeks students in an association, Muslims in their association Jewish/Israeli, Arabic, Turkish, a whole bunch of ethnic student organizations. They obviously were bringing the issues of their "mother country," so to speak, to campus.

Q: I would imagine unlike many other campuses that the Arabic side would be quite well represented because Detroit is the center of Arab immigration.

KAY: It is, and even though I speak Arabic today- and we'll get to that later - I didn't do any Arabic at Michigan, surprisingly. In fact, I still remember the head of the faculty department, I believe Mr. Ramuni; almost all the Arabic books used in universities across the country were published by him and his research staff at The University of Michigan. But no, I didn't do any Arabic at Michigan.

Q: Were ethnic politics running through the University?

KAY: Yes, I remember going to some of those meetings or campus demonstrations; in fact, it was during the first Gulf War as well in '91. And the Arab Students' Association opposed the first Gulf War in Iraq with Kuwait and then, of course, there was the earthquake in Armenia. The Armenian Students' Association had a fund raiser to help their brothers in Armenia. At the time it was still Soviet Armenia.

Q: You were at The University of Michigan in '89 when the Berlin Wall?

KAY: Yes.

Q: Was that something that your professors knew that you were talking about?

KAY: Absolutely. In fact, at the time, not specifically with the Berlin Wall, but in terms of the demise of the Soviet Union, I was taking a Russian Studies class. And the professor brought that up very much so. At the end of the class, he stated there was no longer any Soviet Union, although it's a continuation of history. He mentioned that we talked about how the class could be called "From Petersburg to Petersburg" where there is just a bracket: what's called Leningrad before, and St Petersburg thereafter.

Q: Actually, during World War I, it was called Petrograd.

KAY: Exactly, Petrograd was named for Peter the Great.

Q: What were you pointed towards when you were getting close to graduating?

KAY: Academically?

Q: I mean, just what did you want to do?

KAY: I knew international relations was the way for me. Absolutely. So I applied to different international relations schools across the country.

Q: Where did you go?

KAY: I went to SAIS (School of Advanced International Studies) at Johns Hopkins University in Washington, DC.

Q: You were there from what, eighty?

KAY: No, actually '92 to '94.

Q: How did you find SAIS?

KAY: I loved it. Excellent school but, of course, it brought me to Washington, DC, and I've been here ever since. I love SAIS. That's where I began Arabic. That became my second concentration.

Q: Why Arabic?

KAY: I was fascinated with Arabic culture ever since studying in S Spain and traveling to N Morocco. Through The University of Michigan in Seville, I traveled to Morocco several times and just loved it. I found it fascinating. I started teaching myself the letters, how to read them slowly; the numbers, how to count. I was fascinated by the culture, everything: the language, the history.

Q: You were taking Arabic at SAIS. What form of Arabic?

KAY: They teach modern standard Arabic (MSA), so basically the written is the same throughout the Arab world, and the spoken is a watered down version of Koranic Arabic, like a modern broadcast Arabic.

Q: Were there Arab or Israeli students? [I ask] because the Arab-Israeli dispute has been ongoing for the last God-knows how many years?

KAY: One hundred years.

Q: Did that get involved in your studies at SAIS? Was this a matter of debate?

KAY: Actually, surprisingly at large portion of the students were actually Jewish-American studying Arabic and focused on the Arab-Israeli issue. No, surprisingly no, it was much less in dispute, very little. In fact, one of my co-students there was a Hashemite prince from the royal family of Jordan. Very Americanized. Blonder than yourself because his mother was Swedish.

Q: Going back a touch, how did your family treat the problem of Cyprus and the Turks and all that?

KAY: I remember in fact that we would go to Greece in the summer every year when I was younger and less often when I got older. We were in Greece at that time, the summer of '74, and I do remember that. It was a very scary moment because we were in Northern Greece where my parents were from; my grandparents had fled from Smyrna, as you had mentioned, from the Exodus of 1923. We were very scared because we didn't know what was going on. We knew what was going on, but what really happened? Would the Turks invade? We were relatively close to the Turkish border, so we would be one of the first few to be hit. It was a very scary moment. We were afraid my father would be drafted into the Army even though he was older. It was a very scary moment. I remember it very well. Later on because of my interest in international relations, I eventually made it to Cyprus, both the (Turkish-occupied) north and the (Republic of Cyprus in the) south. It's fascinating.

Q: The Greek version has come out because of the preponderance of Greek-Americans here in the United States. Did you get any feel for the complexity of the Cyprus thing? It was a one-sided thing by any means.

KAY: Oh, no, of course not. In fact, I definitely knew about the complexity. We would go to symposia or talks about the Cyprus issue. I did research on it myself. I wrote several political commentaries on it, scholarship applications based on that, so definitely, very much so. I fact, I even had my letters to the editor published to Time Magazine, Newsweek, and U.S. News & World Report about the Cyprus issue.

Q: What thrust were you giving them?

KAY: I was probably the ripe old age of 12. Again, basically, that the Turkish occupation forces had to leave Cyprus to allow all Cypriots, Greeks and Turks together, to rebuild their war-weary island.

Q: Did you ever run across in college and grad-school any Turkish students?

KAY: At Michigan once and at SAIS, during my second year at the Bologna Center in Italy. Yes, there also.

Q: You attended the Bologna Center?

KAY: I sure did, second year of SAIS, yes.

Q: How did you find that?

KAY: It was excellent, and, of course, spending a year in Italy was fabulous. It dove-tailed nicely with my overseas experiences. I mentioned Spain several times. I also had another summer abroad program studying in France and Italy, separately from Bologna, so in several places. Spain, France, Italy, Quebec, the Netherlands were the total of where I took classes. So, the Bologna Center was excellent.

Q: At SAIS, what were they preparing you for in your field?

KAY: Again, the focus, of course, was international economics and international relations, so it would seem to be where many of the American students would tend to work at the World Bank, the IMF, the State Department, and some with our "friends across the river." So, several places.

Q: When you were here in Washington, did you have the chance to shop around and look and figure out what you wanted to do?

KAY: Yes, I did. It seemed I always wanted to go to the State Dept to become a Foreign Service Officer.

Q: While you were there, did you run across anybody who worked in the State Department?

KAY: A few, but I can't really name names. There wasn't any specific incident, but a few. In fact, I did have a stint at USIS at Embassy Amman when I got a Fulbright Scholarship. I was a Fulbright scholar at the University of Jordan in Amman. And I didn't mention that back in high school I was named a National Merit Scholar, i.e. a scholarship finalist. As a Fulbrighter, I went overseas to a Amman, Jordan to study Arabic and the Arab-Israeli dispute for the academic year. I was there during the time of the Jordanian-Israeli peace treaty. So I assisted the U.S. Embassy at the peace treaty signing ceremonies in Ababa, Jordan. To backtrack one moment, I also had an internship with the State Department at Embassy Paris in the summer of '92.

Q: What were you doing there?

KAY: Half the time in the consular section, the other half of the time in the political section.

Q: What sort of work were you doing first in the consular section?

KAY: First, in the consular section, the summer of '92 was the time where the US Congress had passed laws basically updating our opposition to communism. The time was right after the demise of the Soviet Union. It was no longer considered a crime to be a communist in the sense that you could not officially preclude someone from entering the United States, or refusing someone a visa, based on past communist leanings or tendencies. So there would be some things, luminaries, like Charlie Chaplin, and several others, famous luminaries, basically French intellectuals who for one reason or another had dabbled in leftist politics. We basically had to go through every single file, thousands of names, to excise the ones who were just benign communists vs. veritable mala fide terrorists, real revolutionaries or "terrorists" in today's parlance.

Q: What about in the political section?

KAY: In the political section I covered French politics on the left, so we would follow the leftist paper, Liberation. I would go to symposia at the French Senate among other places, of course, writing about ramifications for the US, if any, sending appropriate cables back to Washington.

Q: What sort of a taste did that give you?

KAY: Oh, I loved it, it was fascinating and fabulous. Of course, I attended the Fourth of July ceremony at the US Embassy and got to meet the French President, Francois Mitterrand.

Q: When you came out of SAIS had you taken the Foreign Service Exam?

KAY: I did. I sure did. Absolutely.

Q: How did you do on it?

KAY: I took it more than once and always passed the written every single time, but did not pass the orals the first time.

Q: What were they telling you?

KAY: Well, they said it was very close, and I should reapply and come back.

Q: Often, too, part of the thing is they like people to get more mature and a little older, I think. Did you get in, did you pass it later?

KAY: I sure did.

Q: Do you remember any of the questions you were asked?

KAY: I remember one of the act-out scenarios. I had to assume the role of an American Foreign Service Officer, basically to convince the Japanese; the role acting or play acting was a Japanese-American lady, a USFS official; I had to convince him to reduce or lower Japan's rice subsidies, because they were damaging our rice exports from the U.S. to Japan. Of course, the woman role player took her role very seriously, manifesting emotional strife, saying "How can you expect our Japanese farmers to let go of our national staple or rice?"

Q: You graduated from the SAIS when?

KAY: 1994.

Q: Did you come in to the Foreign Service then or did you do something else?

KAY: I did not. I went immediately after my Fulbright in Jordan and came back and moved to Washington starting to work in the U.S. Senate with Senator Kennedy.

Q: How was your Arabic by the time you?

KAY: It was very good after an entire year in Jordan. The summer in between at SAIS every Arabic-speaking student enjoys a scholarship to the Arabic Middle East. I went to Damascus, Syria. It was an excellent place to learn Arabic because no one there speaks English or any other foreign language, French or anything. So yes, after a year and two summers (I also had a summer in Tunisia for Arabic), my Arabic is very, very good.

Q: How did you find Jordan? What was your impression of Jordan?

KAY: It was nice. It was very nice. But makes you kind of feel it's almost like a "fake kingdom" in the sense that it really didn't exist. It's created by the British-as many things in the Middle East are-to the chagrin of Syria which has a very ancient history. Also, as you know, two-thirds of the people of Jordan are from Palestine. Palestinians. So, it felt almost fake in the sense almost like a country created for a monarch with people imported from the other side of the river. But it was still very nice. The people were very nice and friendly. The university there was great.

Q: When you got to Syria, how did you find that?

KAY: It was fabulous, almost like stepping back in time. At the time it was on the black list by the State Department. In fact, it just went on the black list. I mean, it has ancient history and remains an excellent place to learn Arabic because no one speaks any other language, so you must sink or swim. You had this feeling like it was like a "wild west" of the Middle East, because it was partly socialist, a former Soviet client state, a pariah state in one extent or the other. Just a fabulous place. The people were wonderful, wonderful.

Q: You say the people were wonderful. Did you stay with a family?

KAY: No, after the first few nights in a hotel, basically I got a little apartment a one bedroom by myself near the historic center.

Q: Was this part of the SAIS program?

KAY: It was. I had a scholarship by SAIS to study Arabic in Syria. The school itself was like a language institute. As I mentioned, all the students at SAIS, all the Arabic-language students, had a scholarship to study in the summer in the Arabic country of their choice.

Q: Did you get much exposure to the politics in Syria?

KAY: A little bit before I went. Once you're in Syria, you cannot discuss politics. It's a no-no, a taboo in their society.

Q: How about meeting Syrian families?

KAY: Oh, they were wonderful, wonderful people. They love Americans, they love foreigners. They had so few foreigners that they would really be like children, so naive to the ways of the outside world; innocent, so to speak, to the outside world.

Q: How about with the young people. Were they aware of the introduction of the computer, the internet, and other things?

KAY: Yes. Mind you, back then it was '92 which was before the internet, even in the U.S. In some respects, society was just as modern as the U.S. Like now you can go out to pizza parlors and cafes. There were no bars, mind you-or very, very few of them-because Syria is predominantly Muslim, so most people there don't drink, at least not publicly. But because it has a Socialist government, Islam as a religious force was also out of the question. Syria had a socialist, secular society. But going out in the evenings it would be very much like the U.S. Girls would dress up to impress the boys, and the boys would cruise by to impress the girls. People are people anywhere, despite what Bush and Cheney might say!

Q: After those studies, what did you do?

KAY: After the summer of '93 in Syria I had the Fulbright in Jordan (Fall '94-Summer '95). I was there for the entire academic year. Then I went back to Washington. Actually, I remember now, I took my second Foreign Service exam overseas. I can't remember, I think at Embassy Amman in Jordan at Consulate General Florence in Italy. Of course, I took the orals in Washington.

Q: So then did you come into the Foreign Service?

KAY: I did not. When I went back to Washington in '95, after my Fulbright, I worked at the U.S. Senate, the office of Senator Kennedy.

Q: What were you doing there?

KAY: I was a foreign policy assistant.

Q: Which meant what?

KAY: Basically, everything from managing the foreign policy desk or office to writing reports and doing policy research. Of course, with Senator Kennedy, the Northern Ireland issue was the main theme for him, and it was very big at the time, as you know, because of the Northern Ireland Peace Accords in '95.

Q: Did you get much of a feel for how a senator operates in the US Senate?

KAY: Yes, I did. I learned about the operations of the US Senate, filibuster techniques and all that. Other issues that he was concerned about included Libya. At the time, it was still a pariah state, about Pan Am flight 007 over Lockerbie, Scotland.

Q: Did you get a chance to use your Arabic?

KAY: Not much, no. Unfortunately, very little.

Q: What was the spirit within the Kennedy thing, because we hear Senator Kennedy is attractive among very bright young people.

KAY: Yes, it was a very hard-working group, and we had very long hours. Ten-hour days, even 12-hour days were not uncommon. A fast-running machine.

Q: Was he around much?

KAY: He was, although I didn't get to see him every day; he was definitely around much.

Q: How long were you working with him?

KAY: I worked with him for a year.

Q: And that was from when to when?

KAY: '95 to '96.

Q: And then what happened?

KAY: The pay was not commensurate with the hours or with my abilities, so I moved on to the private sector.

Q: Doing what?

KAY: Well, I would do some research. I worked at a think tank, doing research.

Q: In what area?

KAY: It was more in consumer awareness, in the private sector but, in fact, it ran against the grain, so to speak. Swimming upstream, if you will. We would support, let's see, tobacco companies (against the victims of tobacco) or the big polluters, so to speak.

Q: I often wonder, when you get involved in that sort of thing, does that cause a crisis of conscience?

KAY: A bit. It did for a bit, but then again, we were paid to do our job, and our clients were the big tobacco companies, the big oil companies, and energy companies.

Q: How effective did you feel that you and your company's work was?

KAY: It was effective. Certainly I would go to conferences and whatnot. It certainly was very effective.

Q: From '96 to '97 you were doing that?

KAY: Correct.

Q: Then what happened?

KAY: Then I passed the Foreign Service exam, and shortly thereafter I joined the Foreign Service in March '98!

Q: How did you find your basic officer course, A-100 course?

KAY: Very well, let me just say right before that we did have a short stint at OPIC, Overseas Project Investment Corporation. In fact, I taught Portuguese there to public-sector bankers and investors.

Q: How did you pick up Portuguese?

KAY: Basically, I picked up Portuguese and continued Russian and Arabic on my own in the evenings, taking classes at The Graduate School, USDA, the US Department of Agriculture. So, I continued my Arabic, and brought up Russian, and basically picked up Portuguese. Enough to teach others.

Q: Were these people mainly going to Brazil?

KAY: Yes, some of them. They would be based in Washington, and yes, deal with Brazil for the most part. A few in lusophone Africa, or maybe Portugal, but mainly in Brazil.

Q: So you entered in '98. What was the composition of your class like?

KAY: There were, I believe, forty-five of us, if I'm correct. You mean how many men, women?

Q: Yes , minorities, and gender.

KAY: Sure, sure. Predominantly it was basically white men, based on pure merits. No reverse discrimination (otherwise known as "affirmative action"), so not that many minorities, if I remember correctly; relatively very few. And at most, 1/3 women. Only 1/3 women and very few minorities, maybe four or five total out of a class of forty-five.

Q: What did you get out of this course?

KAY: They stressed to us the most important part was getting along with others and working well in a team, doing group effort. It was good to share our experiences and see what other peoples' past experiences had been, so I enjoyed it.

Q: At that point, did you have any idea of what you wanted to do?

KAY: Well, unfortunately they began before the A-100 class. We got this phone call, this cryptic phone call, saying, "Which cone do you want to be in?" That was thrust upon me not knowing what cones there were. At the time it was just at the sunset years at USIS, right before its demise as an independent organization, so we had the first USIS Foreign Service class. I had no idea what public diplomacy was at the time, nor did they explain to us, nor did they know what it was. I had no idea, really, and they kept telling us on the phone, well, the choice is yours, but if you choose political, you can't start for another four years. But the choice is yours, and we have lots of spaces in admin in, you know? So obviously, they were trying to push us in one direction (admin), and away from another (political). I'd have liked to have done political, but because of their pushing or brow beating, I chose consular with the little information provided. They really didn't give much. So I was wed to consular, like it or not.

Q: Did you take consular training?

KAY: I certainly did.

Q: How did you find that?

KAY: I liked it. I thought it was very interesting. I loved the American Citizen Services part about visiting Americans in jail. They had that little make-shift prison at FSI/NFATC. I found the immigration law aspect very interesting. If you were born in a plane flying over Guam between 1946 and '47 of an American mother, are you an American citizen or not? We learned the minutiae of American citizenship law, immigration law, and passing on citizenship and whatnot.

Q: As you were doing this, did you want to continue in consular work or were you?

KAY: I was glad, I was happy to be in consular work but eventually, having seen some other cones, I liked some of the other ones. But it unfortunate that once you are in a cone, you are basically married to it for better or for worse, till death do us part.

Q: I came in way before, but the whole idea of coming in and trying to choose your career when you didn't know what it was, was ridiculous.

KAY: It still is, I agree.

Q: As a practical measure, I think a person who's a good political officer could be a good consular officer and perhaps a good public diplomacy officer. Admin/economics were a little more specific, but the other ones are really essentially generalists. Did your Arabic lead you to go to Arab posts?

KAY: Surprisingly, no. As you know, the Foreign Service, if you speak Arabic, they'll send you to Argentina. If you speak Japanese, you'll go to Portugal. So, no, not at all. I ended up in fact in NFATC/FSI. I took and passed nine foreign language tests. At the time before I had gone to Brazil, I ended up choosing Rio as my post. So, my first post was in Rio de Janeiro in Brazil.

Q: So, you were in Rio from when to when?

KAY: I went to Rio in '98 and was there till July 2000.

Q: What was Rio like at that time?

KAY: It was fabulous! It really was. Obviously, crime is an issue, infrastructure (or lack thereof!) is an issue; corruption obviously. But it's just a fabulous city. I mean, it really is. Top notch, world class.

Q: What was the US Consulate General doing there at this point? Had Brasilia really taken over as? At one time Rio was almost the de facto of capital.

KAY: It was. It was the de facto embassy until they built up Brasilia as the capital. When I cleared the building that would become the Consulate General in Rio, it was the embassy building, twelve stories tall. Downtown Rio de Janeiro. And in 1960 it moved, as you know, to everyone's chagrin; the diplomats and Brazilian civil servants with a view of beautiful Rio had to move to the middle of nowhere in Brasilia. But, I loved Rio! But I was one of the few Americans there who also so greatly enjoyed working in Brasilia. We had two or three of what you would call "mini tours." Actually, I had 2 TDYs (temporary tours of duty) in Brasilia, and I loved working there as well.

Q: What type of work were you doing down in Rio?

KAY: In Rio, at the consulate office, as you know, only Consulate General Rio de Janeiro handles immigration for all of Brazil, so we had a mini-tour, if you will, within the section in which we would rotate between Non-Immigrant Visas (NIVs) and Immigrant Visas (IVs). We did a little bit of everything as well as American Citizen Services.

Q: Who were the Brazilian immigrants?

KAY: Brazilian immigrants would emigrate to the U.S. They came mainly from a state of Brazil called Minas Gerais ("General Mines"). It's in the center of the country, the Pennsylvania of Brazil, if you will, basically half way between Rio and Brasilia, and it really began as a nucleus in Boston, many of them would immigrate illegally to greater Boston. This nucleus became a catalyst for Brazilians from that state to emigrate to the US. Of course, this is the rule; there are many exceptions to the rule, but Brazilian migrants would tend to go from Minas Gerais to metropolitan Boston, legally or illegally.

Q: Did you get a feel for what they were doing when they got to Boston?

KAY: Yes. Obviously low-pay, high-labor jobs like washing dishes, painting homes, cleaning homes, taking care of children, or doing construction, those types of professions.

Q: How about non-emigrants, did you do that, too?

KAY: Yes. Visitors at the time. It was before the devaluation of the real, the Brazilian currency. So, at the time, of course, obviously the Brazilian purchasing power parity, the real was very strong, stronger than the dollar. So Brazilians would come to the U.S. for bargains. It was cheaper for them here. So they would flock to Disney, Orlando, Miami, all that.

Q: Did many students go to the United States?

KAY: Yes, at the time, yes. Again, because of the purchasing power parity, it was cheaper for Brazilians to study English in the U.S. than in Brazil. Many of them would study in the US.

Q: Was there much of a refusal rate?

KAY: There was. Obviously, above, well above 3%, so they did not at all qualify for the visa waiver pilot program (VWPP). However, again, before the devaluation, rent was manageable. We'd have long lines, huge numbers, unmanageable visa application rates.

Q: What did you think has grabbed this?

KAY: So, then, of course, as you know, in January of '99, the Brazilian crash came: their currency was devalued by 50% overnight. It went from about 1.12 to the dollar to 2:1 overnight, really. Two to one. Eventually it would go up to three to one! So, their currency lost most of its value.

Q: Did it stop, the visa application rate?

KAY: Oh, yes. In addition, concomitant visa prices went up to about a hundred dollars but felt like it had gone up almost 300% in reals due to the Brazilian currency's devaluation.

Okay, so we were mentioning the Brazilian devaluation in '99, January, where basically they lost 2/3 of the value of their currency. From a selfish point of view, we Americans were paid in dollars in Brazil. It was great because my take-home pay suddenly doubled overnight, as if I had gotten free cash, free money. Before, when I had arrived, I have to mention, I have to emphasize, Brazil was a very expensive place because the currency was basically too strong or over-valued. It was very expensive for us. It felt more expensive than in the U.S. Hence, all the Brazilians traveled to the U.S. With the currency crash, their lives just went down to zero because it really squeezed out the middle class. The rich could still travel in style, and the poor would still go illegally. But the middle class, the bona fide tourists or travelers, could not afford to anymore.

Q: How did you find some of the spirit within the consulate general?

KAY: It was very good, a good working relationship, an excellent Consulate General there named Cristobal Orozco originally from San Diego, I believe. We enjoyed a very good working relationship among the groups. Of course, at time USIS formally became part of the State Department, we had a going away USIS party. It was very good, the atmosphere.

Q: Up in Brasilia, was that a different world?

KAY: It was. It really was a different world, work wise and everything. I mentioned I enjoyed working there very much because you didn't have to go through any other channels. We were at the center of it all in terms of the embassy and the capital. So there, again, I had obviously consular work during two TDYs. They liked me and appreciated my work enough to invite me a second time. I met with the Ambassador. We had a charge d'affaires at the time for almost the entire time and dealt with the Brazilian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, called "Itamaraty," kind of like the equivalent of Foggy Bottom. It was a fabulous place to work. I loved it work-wise.

Q: How about both in Brasilia and in Rio, from your perspective? How was social life?

KAY: The social life in Rio was obviously excellent, focused so much on the beach and outdoors. The closest you could compare to would be in L.A. or Miami in the U.S. to Rio. Brasilia was in many ways kind of like an Ottawa or Canberra, a small provincial capital city.

Q: What about getting out and around the beach? What about the crime problem?

KAY: The crime was a very major problem. I was mugged twice in Brazil, the only times ever in my life. Crime was a major problem. You couldn't leave anything unattended because it would "walk away" immediately. You got used to it in the sense that you became street smart. I knew people who were mugged at gun point. It was a scary situation, but you kind of dealt with it.

Q: Did you find Brazilians sort of open?

KAY: Yes, very friendly people, very open. Interestingly enough, they don't have that fixation that Europeans do. What's your ethnic identity or oh, you can't be American if you're Greek, or you can't be Korean if you're American or whatnot. Brazil is also a country of immigrants, as are most of the republics in the Americas. They also have Brazilians of Japanese descent, of Italian descent, of Angolan descent, every color under the rainbow. So, it wouldn't phase them if we had a Chinese-American or Latino-American or whatnot. They were also a multi-cultural society. That was very refreshing to know that all of us the Americas have a common bond of diversity.

Q: How did you feel the Brazilians you knew felt about the United States?

KAY: Most of them were very positive. Again, this was obvious before the devaluation when many of them could go to the U.S. to study, travel, work, or just visit. And very positive. They liked it very much.

Q: How was Carnaval?

KAY: Oh, Carnaval amazing in the sense that one week the city came to life. They had street carnivals, parades, floats, shows, and more parades. Of course, the major nights of Carnval everyone would go to the Sambodromo, kind of like our Hippodrome. The Sambodromo resembles a stadium where all the bands and parades would march through. I was in Carnival along with our head of the former USIS (who would later become the Consular General when our CG went to Brasilia), we were in the parade itself. It was fabulous.

Q: What were you doing in the parade?

KAY: I was dressed up. You all wore the carnival costumes, and you would Samba. Those who didn't know how to Samba would basically fake it so to speak. It was just fabulous. It was an all night affair, just amazing.

Q: After this time, after you'd been there two years, you got out what, 2000?

KAY: Correct. 2000.

Q: Where did you go?

KAY: Mind you of one thing regarding US policy and working at a US facility abroad as an American. At the time, when I was in Brazil we attacked Sudan and Afghanistan on the same day. Just to go back up a little bit, I was at Main State in '98 when our embassies were bombed in Africa. So, back to Brazil. After we attacked Sudan and Afghanistan, the leftists started to protest outside the Consulate General about American aggression. After completing my tour in Brazil, I came back for home leave, visiting my parents in Michigan. I also traveled a little bit to Hawaii and Alaska before being assigned to Embassy Addis in Ethiopia. So, I spent 6 months at FSI/NFATC learning Amharic, the main language of Ethiopia.

Q: Was anybody making noises about getting you into the Arab world?

KAY: No, actually, after having chosen Addis Ababa, I got a phone call, the "phone call" from my CDO, Career Development Officer, asking if I wanted to go into PA/PD (public diplomacy, former USIS) in Damascus, Syria. Perhaps, regretfully, I said no because I thought I wanted to learn a new language, go to a different country, gain a different experience. I could have had public diplomacy experience in Damascus.

Q: How did you find it hard, Amharic?

KAY: Difficult. It was not as close to Arabic as I had hoped. It is a Semitic language but a distant cousin. It's not as close to Arabic as I had hoped, but the alphabet is fabulous; syllabic characters, difficult to learn because it had much more of a non-Semitic African influence and a very weak or tenuous Semitic influence.

Q: So you went where?

KAY: Addis Ababa. After six months at FSI learning Arabic, I had some African regional studies classes and whatnot, and an official tour, so I would do consular and economic affairs.

Q: What was the situation in Ethiopia when you got there? This would be still in 2000?

KAY: 2001. I forgot to mention, sorry, my mistake. Right after Brazil I had a TDY at the USUN, United Nations General Assembly. The Fall 2000 UN General Assembly.

Q: What were you doing?

KAY: I was a political reporting officer. That was fabulous. Of course, obviously being at the U.N. in New York as a political reporting officer for the 2000 UNGA. As you know, it was the 45th anniversary of the United Nations. Everyone visited from President Clinton to Nelson Mandela whom I met, and Yasser Arafat whom I saw, and the Foreign Minister of Cuba who I did not meet or see. Really, all the leaders of the world. In succession, they had religious conference, a political conference, a cultural conference with Ted Turner and the Pope and the Dali Lama. I mean, everyone under the sun. I was there on the 50-yard line, figuratively. On the First Avenue line, literally.

Q: What sort of work were you doing?

KAY: Political reporting so we would follow?

Q: Which means what?

KAY: Which means we would follow the speeches and reports and write down the key points and summaries. At the time we were focused on two main things: the mission - the USUN mission - focused on what was called the reapportionment which means that basically we would cajole/browbeat our allies, friends and others to basically pay more of the U.N. budget, because the United States Senate had unilaterally imposed an American reduction our payments from 25% of the U.N. budget down to 22%. The U.S. Senate imposed that unilaterally before we could pay a single penny of our arrears. Some countries were willing to pay the extra missing 3% of the entire U.N. budget, in itself still a large amount. At the time Eastern Europe was gaining momentum, the Southeast Asian tigers (South Korea, Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Singapore) had long since entered the first world economically speaking, and we expected them to foot their fair share of the UN bill. In any case, we would cajole/coax/browbeat these countries to pay more; that was a major focus.

Q: You're off to Ethiopia.

KAY: Only after the U.N. which was a fabulous experience, USUN UNGA which again as you mentioned we talked a little bit about the cone, conal experience. I loved political reporting, so it was a shame, so to speak, to be "married" to the consular cone since political reporting was so exciting at USUN.

Q: At that time, within the Foreign Service structure, did you see any opportunity to maneuver?

KAY: Not much. Unfortunately, I guess they call it whimsically a "conal rectification." Sounds like surgery! But no, as I mentioned, at USUN, by the way, I was in what they called the Fifth Committee or Economic Social Committee. ECOSOC for short. You know, the U.N. had six committees: political, economic, special political, ECOSOC and the last one is legal. So I was in Fifth Committee ECOSOC.

Q: Who was the Ambassador in Ethiopia when you were there?

KAY: In Ethiopia at the time, the ambassador was Tibor Nagy, a Hungarian-American.

Q: What was the state of relations in Ethiopia?

KAY: It was very good, obviously, and we were coming up to a very crucial day, if fact. According to the Ethiopian calendar, it was mid-year 1994 at the time. So they were about 7 years behind us according to their own calendar. Of course, they have a different calendar altogether, 13 months instead of 12, with some other idiosyncrasies, the Gregorian calendar instead of the Julian calendar because they are Orthodox Christians. Ethiopian New Year's every year falls about September which actually makes sense because it's close to the Jewish New Year and Coptic Orthodox New Year, both derived from ancient Egyptian New Year, all related to the harvest season and ancient pagan rites. The school season in the U.S. and the farming season, are all tied together to our common proud pagan past. So Ethiopian New Year was in September of that year; we all went, of course, to the Hilton or the Hyatt to celebrate at big parties, just like a regular New Year's with dancing, eating, music and drinking. The next morning, I happened to go back into the embassy because I wanted to check my E-mail and work on New Year's Day! I had CNN on in the background as I was typing away sending E-mails telling people Happy Ethiopian New Year and no, it's not a joke. It was Ethiopian New Year 1994, September 2001 to us. Suddenly I hear shouting and screaming behind me. I looked on the TV monitor and the first plane had hit the World Trade Center. It was 2:45 p.m. local time in East Africa, about 8:45 EST. I thought, oh, it must be a mistake or something. In fact, I was on the phone with an embassy friend of mine, another American colleague at home. We were just talking, and I said, "Oh, it must be a mistake, a little Cessna probably hit, the pilot lost control or whatnot." And then, as you know, as history has recorded, a second plane hit, and I thought, "Oh my God, this is not an accident." I immediately the Ambassador and told him, "Mr. Ambassador, you might want to turn on CNN right now because something strange is happening." I also called the DCM, Deputy Chief of Mission, and that day will live on as 9/11. So, in fact, I was the first one to know, by chance, because, of course, being New Year's Day, embassy were dead drunk, crashed on the couch or recovering from the lewd night before. That became a long day as you know. People started streaming into the embassy, "special" embassy people with work to do. The rest of us went home and watched with horror the events unfolding on our TV screen.

Q: Did you go on heightened alert?

KAY: We did. The next day the embassy was closed to the public. We had obviously a big meeting, the entire staff, full embassy team meeting. The ambassador was very somber, very sad because we didn't have all the information. Initially we thought up to 800 people had been killed in the Pentagon. We didn't know. Of course, there were a lot of military staff, dependents, friends and family in the embassy, so we didn't know who was alive, who had perished. The ambassador had wanted to say what a great year it had been in Ethiopia, Ethiopian New Year's here, and the country was moving ahead, moving forward. And yet we had to focus on this macabre moment.

Q: What type of work were you doing in Ethiopia?

KAY: The first year was consular affairs again. Infamous consulate affairs. In Ethiopia consular affairs is very difficult because there's so much fraud in terms of fake marriages, fake birth certificates, fake HIV test results, bogus marriages, fake families, everything. There were very few, if any, bona fide tourists who travel from Ethiopia. So, the main thrust of the work was immigration. Anyone and everyone would or could get out did so. Of course, the alternate visa program was big and is, as you know, basically a visa lottery. By sending a letter to New Hampshire, they take several lucky thousands of out the millions of desperate letters they receive. Each country I think is allotted a ratio or of 1200 every year, of lottery winners. So we had to deal with all those, a lot of fraud in terms of family fraud. One would win the lottery and suddenly his twelve supposed brothers and sisters (who are only his neighbors!) would try to come in on his coattails and whatnot. So we'd do a lot of DNA testing analysis.

Q: So, you moved into the DNA?

KAY: We did, absolutely; the internet had become an integral part of work in Brazil, at the UN, and in Ethiopia. But Even DNA was fraudulent; they would bribe our nurses and doctors.

Q: Where were the Ethiopian communities? Where were these people going to?

KAY: As you know, Washington, DC has the largest Ethiopian community in the world outside Ethiopia.

Q: Yesterday I bought something at Best Buy and there was a young girl who spoke Amharic. She was born in the United States. Her name is Ferlan, and she is Amharic. Specifically, we have a very large community. Were there any other spots that they were going?

KAY: The vast majority were going to Washington, DC. Also, Seattle has a sizeable community. New Jersey, too, but mainly Washington, DC. This area, the DC metropolitan area, NoVA and suburban Maryland.

Q: Basically, what were you doing, refusing visas?

KAY: Oh, yes! "Dr No" they called me. And with good reason; fraud, even alien smuggling, i.e. trying to smuggle in fake relatives with failed the DNA tests. The new stipulation was you had to be HIV negative. HIV is a major problem in Ethiopia. Some got excluded on that or on marriage fraud. One person would win the visa, then sell to the highest bidder, would marry the highest bidder for a free ticket to the U.S. Visa fraud was rampant!

Q: How did you find working under those conditions?

KAY: Difficult. Very difficult. The embassy also is very cramped in the sense that the consular section had at least 30 souls in one office, in one room, really. Very cramped conditions. I was lucky to have a desk and air to breathe!

Q: Did the ambassador show much interest in what was going on?

KAY: He tried his best. But again, because the conditions were so difficult in the consular section, and our building abutted the exterior wall. We were exposed, dangerously juxtaposing the exterior wall; dangerous because of past and current unrest in the country, replete with gun shots. In short, we were really in an unsafe area. We were thinking of trying to move that section to another point on the compound.

Q: How was life then in Ethiopia?

KAY: Very difficult. Again, I was basically the only American at the embassy who spoke Amharic. I'm not talking about Ethiopian Americans, but the only blue-blooded non-local Americans who spoke Amharic. The same with Brazil. I was not the only one there who spoke Portuguese at all, and I spoke the best Portuguese, completely fluently. Even though I spoke Amharic there, it was still very lonely, a very closed society, in many ways also very xenophobic. Ethiopia was a major empire in history. So, they conquered their neighbors, quite frankly, quite viciously and still have a xenophobic culture, a proud culture, obviously. But they tended to look down upon those who were not Ethiopian Orthodox or Amharic.

Q: Did you find any fraternity as a Greek Orthodox? Any Coptic church?

KAY: Yes, I did. In fact, there is a Greek Orthodox Church there, of course, a plethora of Ethiopian Orthodox churches. As you know, Ethiopia did have a quite large expat community, historically of Greeks, Armenians, and Italians. Of course, the Italians came in the shadow of Mussolini's tanks, but the Greeks and Armenians were there historically. The Armenians were survivors of the 1915 Ottoman genocide, survivors of the Turkish genocide of the Armenians. The Greeks, I believe, historically came from Alexandria. So there were still some small communities of Greeks, Armenians and Italians. I say small because after the Communist Revolution, the DERG (Communist government of Ethiopia) had made conditions difficult for non-Ethiopians. As a result, most of the expats fled. But still there were actually two or three other Greek Americans in the U.S. Embassy. We would occasionally go, rarely actually, to the Greek Church there; they even had a Greek dance there at the Greek Orthodox community center, some Italian and Armenian restaurants. So, yes, there was a lively expat community.

Q: It seems a little bit odd that you were speaking Amharic. Did they use you for political purposes?

KAY: No, they did not. You definitely needed Amharic to get in the visa window. We did have interpreters because Ethiopia has a myriad of languages, like India. Amharic is the Hindi of Ethiopia, if you will. Amharic entitles you to speak with only one-third of the people of the country.

Q: What are the other languages?

KAY: Oromo in the south and Tigrinya in the North; Tigrinya is a linguistic cousin of Amharic. But also in many other tribal languages, even Arabic within the walled city of Harare, conquered the Egyptians. So, no, Amharic was not used in the political section, but the consular section definitely needed Amharic speakers.

Q: What were you getting from the rest of the embassy about relations with the Ethiopians. Was this a period of tension between Ethiopians and Eritreans?

KAY: It was, indeed a period of tension between Ethiopia and Eritrea. That war had just ended a year or two before my arrival. However, given 9/11, the government supported the U.S. and remained helpful. As I mentioned before, diplomatically speaking, they had a very proud culture. It was definitely a very Ethiopian-centered, an Orthodox country from the top on down. The Muslims were a large minority kept under guard, especially after 9/11. The government support the US position very much and was very helpful.

Q: Did you get to travel much?

KAY: A little bit. Again, because the conditions are so difficult, quite frankly, traveling there is expensive. Economically speaking, there are very few flights and quite expensive. The roads are in decrepit condition. I did fly once to Harare in eastern Ethiopia, not far from the Djibouti-Somali border, a Muslim and Arabic town. That was very interesting, fabulous. We did a little bit of hiking in the mountains, and other than that, I just did small day trips into greater Addis. Visited a small town called Nazareth, where they over simplified their alleged ties to Zion. They believed that Ethiopia's king, Emperor Haile Selassie was a descendant of King David in the line of Judah.

Q: Queen of Sheba?

KAY: Queen of Sheba, exactly! Queen Sheba and King David. Yes, it is. So that myth has been part of their national story, a national myth. In any case, there is still a town called Nazareth, a total shit hole, if you ask me. I also did day trips in the Abula area for mountain hikes; beautiful mountains, beautiful scenery!

Q: Was the Fallujah an issue anywhere?

KAY: No, they had already emigrated to Israel. Maybe one little town had a few Ethiopian Jews left, and that became almost like a little bit of a tourist trap. So basically, no.

Q: You were there until when?

KAY: I was there actually less than a year because I curtailed. Many people curtailed, actually. The DCM and the ambassador curtailed too, if I'm correct. Several other people also curtailed. It was a very difficult life. Truly a hardship post, very lonely and difficult; you could not get close to the Ethiopians as much. Because of their extreme and overwhelming poverty, you could not find a true friend. Sooner or later they would reveal their ulterior motives and true intentions. "What can you give me?" Very pathetic because they didn't ask for food or clothing but for stereos and the best of what we had! Not even "What can you give me?" but rather "Give me now!" A shameless attitude; no self respect.

Q: Then what did you do?

KAY: I came back to Washington and was introduced to the world of public diplomacy. I got a tour as a public affairs officer to Montevideo, Uruguay after training in Washington. And let me tell you, I loved it. I found my love in terms of public affairs, public relations. It was fabulous.

Q: You did this from when to when?

KAY: So, I left Ethiopia in 2001, had training at FSI/NFATC and went to Uruguay in 2002 as a public relations officer.

Q: How long were you there?

KAY: Again, about a year.

Q: What were you doing there in Uruguay?

KAY: I was a Public Affairs Officer Assistant, but actually, most of the time I was the Acting Public Affairs Officer because my supervisor had gone back to the U.S. to get married and go on home leave. So I was Acting Public Affairs Officer for a long while. It was a very busy time. We had then Secretary of the Treasury Thomas O'Neill visit us on high-level business, and we had Assistant Secretary for Western Affairs Otto Reich come visit. We had the Putsch in Venezuela, the short-lived coup in Venezuela there, where people though Otto Reich sough to oust Chavez [populist President of Venezuela]. We obviously had to follow the news and whatnot, so it was a very, very busy time period.

Q: What did you do as a public affairs officer?

KAY: I did everything and received White House kudos for my efforts, especially when I was the Acting Public Affairs Officer. I dealt with the press in terms of monitoring the Uruguay papers and let me tell you, the Uruguayans have a strong leftist tendency, a strong leftist party, even though the right was in power at the time. The left was very strong and virulently anti-American, especially our alleged involvement in the failed anti-Chavez Putsch. They would not let us forget our support of their right-wing junta in the '70s.

Q: Were the Tupac Amaru still around?

KAY: Not very much. Tupac Amaru was very weak, discredited. It was a pseudo terrorist organization of quacks and charlatans. Not that strong. But the legacy, so to speak, lived on, a little bit like the Che Guevara myth. And of course, in addition to dealing with the press, the public affairs office also dealt with cultural affairs. For example, the Fulbright scholarship was very strong. We would "adopt" schools, so to speak. Over a series of Saturdays, we went and painted schools, cleaned up school courtyards, planted trees, all very proactive. On the one year anniversary of 9/11, I was in Uruguay. I organized the ceremony in which we had the President of Uruguay, the head of the opposition (currently president). Everyone who was anyone came. We had a big ceremony. We donated trees to plant a forest, one tree for every victim of 9/11, so almost 3,000 trees. It was an excellent time. Uruguay in many senses is basically a "normal" place to live and work. There's theater, culture, the beach, night life, restaurants, anything under the sun. So, very normal, very different from the my previous experience. Just a normal place to live. Of course, Buenos Aires is right across the river, a little boat would take you there, so many embassy personnel would go to Buenos Aires for the weekend. I went back to Brazil from Uruguay, not very far, a short flight away. I had a fabulous time, I really, really did. Working in Uruguay was excellent.

Q: How did you find dealing with the Uruguayan press? You mentioned particularly because of Chavez, where we had the appearance of supporting the attempt to oust him. He came out of the populist leftist movement in Venezuela, and I think there was a short lived government for three days or something like that; then it went down the tubes. I think we probably jumped in a little too quickly to recognize it. I assume there was a very large leftist press.

KAY: There wasn't a very large leftist press, just active and loud. At the same time, President Batlle of Uruguay, a friend of Bush on the right, had severed all diplomatic relations with Cuba. He sent the Cuban ambassador back home packing declaring him a persona non grata, all that. The leftist press had a field day with that. There were demonstrations and parades, and they accompanied the Cuban ambassador en masse to the airport to see him off. So, it was really a PR coup for them, because it had such public relations bonanza. Again, the government was very close to us. The people were again about half and half, 50/50, thanks to the strong leftist party. They did not like the U.S. because of our involvement in the coup against Chavez. Because of Tupac Amaru and thanks to our prior support of the right wing governments in South America. Because of the abuses of the right wing death squads against leftists back in the '70s. So it was an uphill battle trying to present the U.S. side, trying to defend US policy, basically. In public relations, our mission was to expand American visibility and culture, overseas and present our side to the press. And of course, to enhance cross-cultural links. Uruguayans coming to the U.S., Americans going to Uruguay.

Q: In Uruguay, did the intellectual class play much of a role as it does in France or some other places?

KAY: Yes, you mean politically or academically?

Q: Politically.

KAY: Yes, they did, yes. And again, obviously many much of the intelligentsia, who had fled in the '70s because of the right wing government, the junta, would come back and were violently anti-American. Even in their movies, even in the cinema, leftist tendencies pervaded, permeating the medium in which many Uruguayan films -they produce all of about two a year-would have an anti-American theme to it. Some more obvious than others, where the oppressed but proud Uruguayan would fight off the behemoth American company. In fact, economics came into play in which they would refuse to privatize decrepit, state-subsidized companies. They refused to privatize companies falling apart. They thought that was pride, Uruguayan pride. The factory was decrepit, old, and in debt, and there would be foreign conglomerates wanting to privatize it, but they would refuse on political grounds, even though this is an economic question. So, privatizing Uruguay was more difficult than pulling teeth. It's unfortunate.

Q: How did you find social life there?

KAY: Again, excellent. Again, in many ways it was simply a normal place to live and work. A place you could basically raise your kids. Very nice. On a human level, the people were just wonderful. It is a sophisticated society. As you know, before the crisis, the Argentine crisis which affected Uruguay-and I was there and I can get to that-Uruguay enjoyed the highest standard of living in Latin America. Almost on the par with Puerto Rico which is, of course, close to American standards. After the crisis, Chili has the highest standard of living. Uruguay, with a 97% literacy rate, had had a high standard of living, almost on a par with Spain or Italy. Of course, most of the people are of Spanish and Italian descent. I was in Uruguay just before the Argentine crisis. Of course, Argentina-Uruguay is like the U.S.-Canada. The elephant sneezes and the mouse catches a cold so to speak. Argentine is really the U.S. of Latin America compared to Uruguay which is like the Canada of South America. So, the Argentine crisis overwhelmed Uruguay.

Q: Would you explain what the Argentine crisis was?

KAY: Yes, I certainly will. The Argentines defaulted on their IMF loans and could no longer maintain the 1:1 convertibility of the Argentine peso to the US dollar. In short, they were really spending too much and were billions of dollars in debt. So, the Argentines defaulted on their international loans and froze all assets in the bank. Whether pesos or dollars, the banks literally closed. This affected Uruguay in which so many Argentines used to play in Punta del Este, the quintessential Uruguayan beach/gambling resort. Wealthy Argentines used to spend, to get away, but could no longer afford it. So Uruguay suddenly lost its major market of tourists, Argentines. No more money. The Argentine economy fell quickly, pulling down the Uruguayan economy with it. The Uruguayan peso was also tied to the U.S. dollar and also had to fluctuate because of the discrepancies between imports and exports, borrowing in dollars and paying in pesos. So, again, Uruguay devalued the Uruguayan peso. They were several days in which I, as Acting Public Affairs Officer, had to cover every public affairs aspect of the Uruguayan crisis in which their banks closed. There were riots in the streets. The left basically added fuel to the flames in more ways than one urging their supporters to riot, looting stores and plundering shops. Banks were shut. This was a scary moment in Uruguay. Things like these don't happen in Uruguay. Up until then, it had been a quiet, safe society. So, it was scary. All the theaters were closed, an amazing fact since theatre and cultural life are so important. So many theaters and cinemas, all closed.

Q: What was the left trying to do?

KAY: Destabilize the government. They were starting that the government could not deliver on economic and social promises. To the government's credit, it was not their fault that Argentina was failing. They were the closest correlation would the Canada of South America. Argentina had such a strong influence over Uruguay, that Uruguay could not stand its own. So, at the time, during that time, as I mentioned, the Secretary of the Treasury Paul O'Neill visited. Of course, under the IFM, Argentina had defaulted on its loans. Because Uruguay was going to default on its loans, the banks closed. There was literally no money, no cash, nothing; they called it the "corralito." The US funded a 1.6 billion dollar bridge loan to Uruguay. The government of Uruguay was a close ally of President Bush; President Batlle of Uruguay still helped Bush, so the Bush administration returned the favor. We helped them get through the difficult time by loaning this money, this amount of money, $1.6 billion so they could pay off their debts, pay their civil workers and civil service, and re-open the banks with currency reserves, financial liquidity. Though we helped, this not enough, to the left, too little, too late. We pulled Uruguay out of this crisis. At the same time, Otto Reich became Assistant Secretary for Western Affairs. The left accused him in the press of being the man behind the scenes of the Putsch, having engineered the Chavez coup. Otto Reich was Cuban-American. He joked about being a right-wing ideologue, an obvious a hawk in the Bush administration, reviled by the left. In addition, Secretary O'Neill was egged, and his car was trashed in Argentina because of the protest against the IMF. Those were turbulent times by Uruguayan standards; I was proud to have served in Uruguay during the economic crisis, and in the midst of their political divisions.

Q: Did you finally have at that time, certainly in Europe there is almost a visceral repulsion of President Bush and his administration. Was that played out??

KAY: It was, mind you, before the second Iraq war, so not as much, but it was definitely there, latent, and it would come up for Latin American issues like Cuba, the Tupac Amaru, the Chavez coup. Yes, it was ready to explode in some ways or others. To give you a little hint, Uruguayan gasoline was so expensive because of that one indebted company, the state oil company. We would easily pay $2 a gallon at the time, double prices in the US. Now, it's common here in the U.S., but at the time it was very, very expensive. To give you an example, they would rather pay exorbitant prices for oil as long as it was Uruguayan oil, rather than sell off their indebted company to a private American firm.

Q: You talked about the left, but was this a country where the right had been voted in?

KAY: Yes, and in fact, I happened to be visiting Uruguay from Brazil over Thanksgiving weekend, 1999 on the eve of those elections when President Batlle won. Uruguay, as you know, is basically a rural society where half the population of 3 million people, i.e. one and a half million live in Montevideo, the capital. And the rest of the countryside was under populated, the pampas or plains with farmers and small towns. The right swept every single province in the countryside but lost the capital, which means half and half: 1.5 million people each. It was very much like the Bush-Gore election with a split down the middle, except it was a rural urban divide. Metropolitan Montevideo and the workers voted for the left; the entire countryside voted for the right. So the country looked all red with the rural provincial voting for the right because the countryside is full of socially-conservative people. The entire countryside voted for the right. Only the city of Montevideo was blue, voting for the left.

Q: Who was the ambassador during this?

KAY: The ambassador there was Martin Silverstein, an appointee by Bush from Philadelphia.

Q: How was he as an ambassador?

KAY: A nasty son of a bitch with little to no Spanish. He had his issues as well. The DCM under him left for "personal reasons." In reality, he had kicked her out, making life so miserable for her she left to get away from him. He was an incompetent political appointee, a lawyer by training, with little to no knowledge of Uruguay.

Q: Did that affect your work?

KAY: It did. For example, the ambassador told me that he as a non-Christian, he compared himself to the Pope (!), saying that he was to the embassy what the Pope is to the Roman Catholic Church, which means he was the one figurehead and insisted on having his picture splashed across every web site, every photo. For example, after the DCM left, he had me excise her out of photos, like the novel 1984, very Orwellian. So, that would give you a taste of the flair for his undiplomatic tactics.

Q: When you left, after your tour, what happened?

KAY: I had curtailed only once, from Ethiopia. In Uruguay I did not curtail my tour. Basically, at the time, I was not tenured. So, after over five years of service to the U.S. government, I left.

Q: Looking back on it, how did this come about?

KAY: I feel obviously sad because I really didn't get to pursue my love of public affairs which I love so much. I loved public affairs, including dealing with the Press, where everything's due yesterday. In press relations, you're running on adrenaline and putting in 18-hour days and whatnot. The other side of cultural affairs, everything is going slowly; you're slowly developing links and ties relationships through cultural programs and exchanges, a slow, composite process. I was disappointed to have been able to pursue my love for and interest in public affairs. As I mentioned, you're being wed or married to one cone, not knowing what that cone is, and conal rectification is very difficult. Swimming upstream, so to speak. I think it was because I was lonely and sad in Ethiopia, that reflected on my EER, and for that reason, I was not tenured. So I was disappointed by the system!

Q: It can be. You can get, particularly in the early stage in one's career, you're very fragile, and the wrong assignment or sometimes the wrong rating officer or something like that can do a lot of damage whereas as time goes on, people are looking at what you're doing over the whole time. Did you ever regret not being able to use your Arabic?

KAY: I did, and perhaps my golden opportunity knocks only once. Perhaps had I chosen to be a public affairs officer in Damascus, I never would have gone to Ethiopia. I could have utilized my Arabic and gotten into public affairs earlier, not waiting until my last tour in Uruguay. But overall, I was very happy with my short but sweet career in the US Foreign Service. I had fabulous tours. Four out of the five were fabulous. Brazil, the UN, and Uruguay were fabulous tours. I had an excellent time. The great advantage was able to do a variety of jobs: consular affairs, political reporting, and public affairs. So, I ran the gamut in terms of locations and jobs.

Q: What are you doing now?

KAY: Now I am waiting for my top-top secret clearance to come through to work at the National Security Agency as a linguist/language analyst.

Q: I'm sure Arabic speakers all of a sudden are at a premium.

KAY: Oh, yes. Since 9/11 and, as you know, I speak, read, and write ten different languages total, so hopefully a different language will be at a premium there.

Q: Great! I want to thank you very much.

KAY: Well, thank you so much!

End of interview